

**Professional Ideology and the Psychological Contract: an
Analysis of the Psychological Contracts of Registered Nurses,
Research Scientists and Primary School Teachers Employed in
Public Sector Organisations.**

By Wayne O'Donohue, B.A. (UQ), M.Sc. (GU)

**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Tasmania
(May, 2007)**

Declaration

I declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution nor, so far as I am aware, any material published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Wayne O'Donohue

Date / /

Authority of Access

This thesis may be made available for loan, and limited copying is permitted in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

Wayne O'Donohue

Date / /

Abstract

The increasingly complex world of work has prompted many individuals to search for new meaning and purpose in their work. For many employed professionals, meaning and purpose are also realised through identification with their profession and commitment to its distinctive ideology of values and beliefs about work and organizations. Published research into the psychological contract between the employee and the organization has given limited consideration to the role that occupational ideologies play in psychological contracts. This study addresses that gap in the literature.

The study has two broad themes: the relationship between the occupational ideologies of employed professionals and their psychological contracts, and the importance of that relationship for conceptualisation of the psychological contract. Using a qualitative research design, the study explores the perceptions of a sample of registered nurses, research scientists and primary teachers with regard to their occupational ideologies and the terms of their psychological contracts.

The research findings show that study participants in each sample group perceived their contributions to the organization to include professional competence, a client focus, and a service orientation, that is, delivery on core elements in their occupational ideologies. Study participants also perceived the provision of credible commitments of support as being part of the contribution by their organizations under the psychological contract. In regard to perceived

Abstract (continued)

failure by the organization to provide this support, the research findings show clear impacts on the individual in terms of commitment and job performance. In addition, the findings reveal nuances and a level of complexity in attitudinal and behavioural responses by the individual that have not hitherto been revealed in psychological contract research.

The study discusses the relevance of the research findings for the bidimensional (transactional/economic and relational/socio-emotional) interpretative framework that currently underpins the concept of the psychological contract. It supports calls in the literature for a broadening of this framework to include an ideological dimension. The study also discusses the multiplicity and interdependency of exchange that professional employees can engage in as a consequence of enacting their occupational ideologies through their psychological contract. It calls into question the emphasis on a single dyadic relationship with the organization that underpins the predominant conceptual approach used in much of the work to date on the psychological contract.

Finally, a number of possible future research directions are outlined. The study highlights the need for managers to understand the nature of the occupational ideologies operating within their organization, and how, in the case of professional employees, these ideologies can drive perceptions about what they contribute to the organization and what the organization is expected to contribute in return.

Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I owe sincere thanks for their assistance throughout the evolution of this thesis. First, I would like to express my gratitude to my doctoral supervisors. Some doctoral students only have one but over the period of my candidature I had three - Dr Lindsay Nelson, Dr Dallas Hanson, and Dr Martin Grimmer – who were generous with their time, encouragement and advice. Second, I wish to thank the people who generously gave of their time to participate in this study for their co-operation and openness about their professional lives. Third, I would like to thank my academic colleagues for their support during my studies, particularly Dr Cathy Sheehan, Dr Mark Wickham, and Megan Woods, all of who helped me ‘defrag’ my ideas along the way. Finally, and most of all, I thank Jenny and David for their encouragement, patience and confidence in me.

“In research, as in conversation, we meet ourselves.”
(Morgan, 1983)

Table of Contents

	Page
Declaration	ii
Authority of access	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of contents	vii
List of Tables	xi
List of Figures	xii
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
Chapter Objectives	1
Rationale for study	1
Research opportunity	3
Organisation of thesis	7
Chapter 2 – Workplace change and the psychological contract	9
Chapter Objectives	9
Changing forms of employment and the psychological contract	9
Transition to the new employee-organisation relationship	13
Search for meaning in work	15
Occupations and ideologies	17
Professions and ideologies	19
Management and professional ideologies	22
Professions, careers and commitment	26
Chapter summary	28

Table of Contents (continued)

	Page
Chapter 3 – Concept of the psychological contract	30
Chapter Objectives	30
Development of the psychological contract concept	30
Early theorists	31
The cognitive-perceptual approach	38
Chapter summary	53
Chapter 4 – Issues concerning the psychological contract	56
Chapter Objectives	56
Bidimensional interpretative framework	56
Single dyadic (employee–organisation) relationship	65
The promise-based model of contract	74
Research focus	78
Research questions	85
Chapter summary	85
Chapter 5 – Research design and method	87
Chapter Objectives	87
Research paradigms and designs	87
Research method	91
Major components	96
Completion of questionnaires	96
Interviews	97
Data analysis and interpretation	106
Chapter summary	112

Table of Contents (continued)

	Page
Chapter 6 – Results and analysis of data	114
Chapter Objectives	114
Psychological contract and ideological orientation	114
Professional ideologies and the psychological contract	120
Theme 1: Substance	122
Substance – contribution by the individual	122
Substance – contribution by the organisation	132
Summary – Theme 1: Substance	138
Theme 2: Strength	141
Strength – organisational and professional commitment	143
Strength – job performance	152
Summary – Theme 2: Strength	162
Chapter summary	165
Chapter 7 – Discussion and conclusion	166
Chapter Objectives	166
Overview	166
Discussion	168
Limitations of the research	185

Table of Contents (continued)

	Page
Chapter 7 – Discussion and conclusion (continued)	
Future directions	190
Conclusion	197
References	200
Appendices	
1. Psychological Contract Scale (PCS)	212
2. Ideological Perspective Questionnaire (IPQ)	214
3. Ethics Committee Documentation	216
1. Study Information Sheet	
2. Statement of informed consent	
4. PCS responses	221
5. IPQ responses	228
6. Published refereed work relevant to this thesis	234
1. O'Donohue, W., Sheehan, C., Hecker, R. & Holland, P. 2004 <i>A hidden dimension? Work ideology and psychological contracts</i> . Proceedings of the 18th ANZAM Conference, Dunedin, N.Z.	
2. O'Donohue, W & Nelson, L. 2005. <i>Professional work ideology and psychological contracts</i> . Proceedings of the 1st Australian Centre for Research in Employment and Work (ACREW) Conference, Melbourne, Victoria.	
3. O'Donohue, W., Sheehan, C., Hecker, R. & Holland, P. 2007. The psychological contract of knowledge workers. <i>Journal of Knowledge Management</i> , 11(2): 73 - 82.	
7. Sample Interview transcript	272

List of Tables

	Page
Table 2.1 – Changing basis of the employee-organisation relationship	14
Table 2.2 – Professional and managerial schemas	23
Table 3.1 – A continuum of contract terms and features	50
Table 3.2 – Types of psychological contracts	51
Table 4.1 – Psychological contract dimensions	61
Table 4.2 – Psychological contract – currencies of exchange	66
Table 5.1 – Demographic data	100

List of Figures

	Page
Figure 4.1 – Ideology infused contract model	64
Figure 5.1 – Comparison of basic research design types	89
Figure 5.2 – Data coding structure for theme	108
Figure 6.1 – Substance theme for professional ideology	123
Figure 6.2 – Strength theme for professional ideology	142
Figure 7.1 – Dyadic exchange relationship with contribution flow	180
Figure 7.2 – Contribution flows from study participants' perspective	182